ADAM KENDON: *SIGN LANGUAGE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA. A PRIMARY SIGN LANGUAGE FROM THE UPPER LAGAIP VALLEY, ENGA PROVINCE*

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For most readers, and Czech readers in particular, Adam Kendon is primarily known for his pioneering work on the gestural medium (or the kinesic medium, as he would probably prefer to call it nowadays), which culminated in his 2004 monograph entitled *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Kendon, 2004) that has, in the realm of gesture studies, already become a classic. Less attention seems to have been paid to his earlier work, work that has found its apogee in the monumental book on Australian Aboriginal sign languages (Kendon, 2013/1988). It would be, however, entirely false to say that these two lines of Kendon's thought are separated. Quite the contrary, the obvious correspondences between Kendon's "ethnographic" work and his general reflections on the kinesic medium are plain to see — both are informed by the same fundamental premises, and one of the merits of the present volume, though far from being the only one, is that it permits us to follow the formation of the theoretical background that seems to determine both lines of Kendon's inquiry.

Sign Language in Papua New Guinea comprises — with some minor revisions and several added footnotes — three extensive papers that Kendon published in the journal *Semiotica* in 1980. The topic of the papers is a description of the sign language used by a deaf speaker (a woman named Imanoli) in the Enga province in Papua New Guinea (PNG), based on five film segments recorded at the end of 1975. The subject of Kendon's investigation, therefore, is a *primary* sign language, unlike the *alternate* sign languages — that is, sign languages used by hearing speakers who have to abstain, for one reason or another, from using spoken language on particular occasions (Kendon, 2013/1988, pp. 2–5) — that Kendon examined later in his 1988 monograph. Despite the limited scope of the material on which the analysis is based, Kendon's insights both into this particular sign language system and into certain general features of kinesic action are striking.

The encounter with Imanoli and her sister Lanyela (who was hearing but fluent in sign), as Kendon states in the introduction, was a random one and took place during an expedition whose aim was to study face-to-face interaction among the (hearing) Enga. As for the sign language Imanoli used, it seems to resist the labels commonly employed in sign language linguistics. It is neither a "home-sign" nor a "village sign language". It is not home-sign insofar as "the gestural system we are dealing with is not confined to the Upper Lagaip region, but extends more widely in this part of the

Enga area" (p. 5).[1] But neither does the system fit the label of a "village sign language" as it lacks the fundamental characteristics usually connected with this category of sign languages, such as being spoken by a group of people inhabiting a particular village with higher percentage of hereditary deafness (see Zeshan & de Vos, 2012).

Be that as it may — and paradoxical as it may seem at first sight — the principal interest of Kendon's analysis lies perhaps in the fact that, despite his thorough knowledge and frequent reference to the works of Stokoe, Klima, Bellugi, Friedman and many others, his methodological and theoretical background is not "contaminated" by the political and emancipatory struggles of sign language linguistics of the time, which strives to demonstrate the language-like character of signing and concentrates, therefore, on those features of sign languages that present clear analogies with spoken language. If, as Kendon points out in the introduction, "the films of signed conversation [of Imanoli] [...] provoked me to investigate how semantic substance could be conveyed through visible bodily action" — a key issue that has become, as we know, the fundamental guideline that has determined Kendon's inquiry concerning gesture in general —, it was because "I was not in the least bit concerned with whether what I was dealing with was 'language' or not and was free, thus, to consider whatever might be relevant for understanding how these signers created the meaning for each other" (p. X). This *docta ignorantia* has led not only to remarkable terminological innovations but, above all, to insights concerning the structure and functioning of sign language(s) that were, as the author rather modestly admits on the same page, "somewhat ahead of its time": these concern not only iconicity, but also the non-manual components of signing such as facial expression, head movements or gaze direction that represent integral components of the message transmission in signing but were (apart from some exceptions) largely neglected in the early stages of the development of sign language linguistics.

The principal dimension of Kendon's analysis of Imanoli's signing is twofold: *descriptive* and *comparative*. The specific features of Enga signing are continuously being compared to those of American sign language (ASL) or other sign language systems, including alternate ones, such as the sign system of sawmill workers in British Columbia or the Plains Indian sign language (PISL), with the aim to demonstrate that "any gestural-visual linguistic system makes use of a number of similar organizational principles" (p. 2). This, again, points to what seems to be Kendon's fundamentally monistic conception of the kinesic medium, despite its rich inner differentiation.

Apart from a chapter devoted to "General Properties of Sign" (pp. 11–16), the analysis of the Enga sign language proper is divided into five sections: processes of sign formation (pp. 17–35), the question of iconicity and of the relationship between sign and its referent (pp. 37–63), different uses of pointing (pp. 65–74), the so-called concurrent action, that is, the non-manual components of signing (pp. 75–89), and the discourse construction, i.e., the supra-lexical aspect of sign production (pp. 91–108). In what follows, rather than provide an exhaustive overview, I will

1 This observation of Kendon's is based on the fact that Ngangane Waipili, an interpreter and a field assistant whose sister was deaf, was familiar with the system, even though he came from a different region of the Enga area.

briefly mention what I consider to represent the most fundamental conceptual innovations of this analysis.

The question of iconicity first. When reflecting upon what he terms "the process of signification in signing" (p. 39), Kendon proposes a twofold distinction with respect to the iconicity of signs: the distinction between the *referent* and between the *base* of a sign. "The referent of a sign is the meaning that it carries in a given context of use. The base of the sign, on the other hand, is the object or action that the production of the sign is derived from" (ibid.). Kendon himself provides a clear illustration of this distinction, using the Enga sign for SLEEP: "A flat hand is laid alongside the cheek, while the head is tilted to one side as if to rest upon the hand" (ibid.). Thus, the form of the sign bears a marked similarity to the action of lying down and preparing for sleep; this action is what constitutes the base of the sign. The sign's referent, however, is far from being univocal. First, the sign does not refer to the specific action of lying down, but to the state of sleeping. Furthermore, the reference may be extended to make the sign refer to various things associated with sleeping: metonymically, for example, it may refer to a house (a place where one usually sleeps). In other words, iconicity is not a simple matter, and here Kendon anticipates, among others, the research on iconicity conducted by Sarah Taub more than twenty years later (Taub, 2001).

Instead of summarizing Kendon's classification of signs based on the distinction in question, let us mention some of his remarkable general insights regarding sign formation. Among these, there is the fact that "certain kinds of referents tend to favor certain kinds of realization devices" (p. 53). When, for example, the enactment through which the base of the sign is represented aims at representing an object that is typically subjected to some kind of manipulatory activity on the part of humans, it is precisely this manipulation that often serves as a basis for the enactment in question (Kendon gives an example of SWEET POTATO, where the corresponding sign is formed by performing the action of knocking the dust off the sweet potato prior to eating it). The enactment of a movement pattern, on the other hand, tends to be used when the object represented has an independent life and is less prone to being manipulated (such is often the case, for instance, in signs for animals).

These findings concerning sign formation devices in the Enga sign system are subsequently compared to those described in two other (and unrelated) sign language systems, namely, the sign language used by the Pitta Pitta tribe of north central Queensland and the already mentioned system of sawmill workers in British Columbia. The comparison supports the thesis announced earlier in the book: that despite the obvious differences in particular forms of lexical signs, the "strategies" of sign formation are remarkably similar across different sign languages. Let us quote Kendon: "We suggest (...) that although signs for similar referents in different sign languages may often differ markedly from one another, the realization processes that underlie the creation of such signs may be fundamentally the same" (p. 63). Needless to say that this conclusion has since been corroborated by subsequent comparative sign language research.

Moreover, Kendon's analysis of the Enga signing is far from being limited to the sign "vocabulary" only and it comprises many different ways through which the kinesic medium becomes a carrier of meaning. This approach becomes most salient in

the chapter on concurrent action, that is, "action in other parts of the body concurrent with the production of signs" (p. 75). In general, the chapter on concurrent action shows how this action serves to disambiguate the signs, to instruct the recipient about the exact kind of utterance that is being produced (a question, a joke), or to comment upon the signer's feelings; briefly, to convey "complex additional information" complementing the signed message.

For the sake of brevity, I will only remark that the final chapter on the aspect of discourse construction contains, apart from the analyses of Enga signing *per se*, some most interesting historical references. When Kendon speaks about "the sequential arrangement of signs in phrases" (p. 92), he notes a certain tendency of the sign order to be consistent (even though, as he points out, this consistency is not to be confused with rigidity of any kind): "[...] we find that signs that refer to actions or states tend to occur late in the sequence, whereas signs that refer to the source or goal of an action tend to occur first [...] the tendency is to sign first a reference to whom or what the utterance is to be about, and then to sign references to how the components of the account are related to one another" (*ibid.*). Not only is this tendency observable in other sign languages described at the given period, such as ASL — Kendon makes reference to much earlier investigations of sign languages, those conducted by Wundt, Mallery and Tylor in the second half of the nineteenth century (Tylor, 1878; Mallery, 1972/1880; Wundt, 1973), aptly stating that these earlier investigators reached very similar conclusions concerning sign order as well as other aspects of sign language structure, such as the importance of spatial relationships in the signed discourse (pp. 93–94). The interest in the historical dimension of research concerning sign languages (or the kinesic medium in general) represents a consistent feature of Kendon's theoretical undertaking; suffice it to read the "historical" chapter of his 2004 book (Kendon, 2004, pp. 17–61; Wundt, Mallery and Tylor are treated in detail on pp. 50–60). Those "pre-Stokoean" references bring forth, albeit implicitly, an interesting paradox that the history of sign language research has left us with. The widely maintained "official" version of this history has it that it was Stokoe's phonological analysis of sign language structure, establishing, beyond all doubt, the existence of the "duality of patterning" in sign language, that has irrevocably proved the hitherto unacknowledged linguistic nature of signing (Stokoe, 1960). While nobody denies the groundbreaking character of Stokoe's approach, we should also bear in mind that earlier investigators, such as those mentioned by Kendon, not only did not deny the linguistic (or language-like) nature of signing (Mallery, for example, is quite explicit on this point), but have presented some very acute observations concerning its functioning, such as, for instance, the above-mentioned importance of spatial relationships that Stokoe's structural analysis has not taken into account (at least not primarily). It is, therefore, not without interest to see that Kendon's sustained admiration for certain pre-Stokoean "students of sign languages" (p. 94) is already present in his 1980 papers on the Enga signing.

In his concluding remarks, Kendon tackles the fundamental question that has been emerging, especially in their comparative passages, throughout the three papers: Why is it that various sign languages, be they primary or alternate, and despite the differences in the concrete forms of lexical signs, employ similar strategies of

creating meaning and of encoding the logical relationships between the elements of discourse? The possible answer lies, Kendon points out, in the different relationship that the visual-manual modality entertains with what he terms the "reference field" (p. 113). Because sign languages, with their use of space and movement, are "not restricted to a single dimension as speech is" (*ibid.*), the encoding of the reference field into signs seems to be more direct than the one taking place in "unidimensional" spoken languages which need to have recourse to symbolic categories that, compared to sign languages, bear much less "resemblance between expression and the reference field expressed" (*ibid.*). It is well possible, then, that the way reality is encoded in sign languages corresponds more closely to the way information about that reality is stored in the human mind. Let us note in passing that in asking and answering this question, Kendon rejoins certain eighteenth-century philosophers (Diderot in particular), for whom the issue of whether gestures or sign language — rather than spoken language — may provide us with information concerning "the natural order of ideas" in the human mind was a crucial one. If Kendon calls, in the final sentences of his conclusion, for a more extensive comparative study of different sign languages, it is in hope of gaining "a more direct insight into the humanly universal modes of mentation", an insight that spoken languages, encumbered as they are with various "tactics" of conveying meaning through linear strings of phonemes, are perhaps less apt to provide (*ibid.*).

The book is closed by two appendices. In their essay "Sign Language in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands" (pp. 141–183), Lauren W. Reed and Alan Rumsey provide a useful overview summarizing the present state of research on different "regional" PNG sign languages (of which Enga signing was but one particular example), including a brief comparative analysis of their different regional varieties (pp. 164–176) and information on the "official" PNG sign language, as it has developed during the recent decades (pp. 153–160).

Finally, the concluding essay by Sherman Wilcox, "Kendon's work on a signed language from the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea" (pp. 185–196) adds several astute remarks on Kendon's approach, with regard, above all, to the still much-debated relationship between gesture and sign. Kendon's "usage based view" (or even what Wilcox terms a "*user based perspective*", p. 192) of language and gesture, already clearly present in his studies on the Enga material, "not only permits us to compare and contrast spoken and signed languages but also to include gesture in the multimodal mix" (p. 191). Both sign and gesture being "visible bodily actions", the boundary between the two becomes necessarily blurred.

I have already suggested that, despite forty years having elapsed from the original publication of Kendon's papers, the value of their 2020 reedition is much more than merely a "documentary" one. These are not juvenilia of any sort, the interest of which would consist simply in casting light on the author's intellectual development: in more than one respect, the author was indeed ahead of his time, and it is not only because of the particular object and nature of his investigation, situated at the crossroads between the descriptive and comparative approach and undertaken at a time when linguists' interest in non-European sign languages in their various modalities and specificities was considerably less widespread than it is today. Already in the

mid-seventies, when the encounter with Imanoli took place, Kendon had adopted an overtly holistic view of kinesic action. What is more, this kinesic action extends far beyond its manual modality — as Kendon shows in the chapter on concurrent action, it is not only hands, but the human body as a whole that becomes the vehicle of the "semantic substance". Sherman Wilcox has put it well: "Linguists should be striving to emulate Kendon's ability to document the semiotic diversity of visible bodily action in utterance" (p. 195). We cannot but endorse this remark.

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